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# LABOR ORGANIZATIONS.

THEIR POLITICAL

AND

ECONOMIC SERVICE TO SOCIETY.

A PAPER

READ BEFORE THE AMERICAN SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION,  
SEPTEMBER 9, 1887,

BY

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BOSTON

PRESS OF GEO. E. CROSBY & CO., 383 WASHINGTON STREET.  
1887.

YANKEE CLOTH  
JUN 10  
NOTES TO

# LABOR ORGANIZATIONS.

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We owe to the Germans the most unbiased account of the English Trade Unions. From Brentano and Held to Bernreither their work is informed by the true scientific quality. It is objective, impersonal and infinitely painstaking. Brentano's investigations are now almost antiquated. Dr. Bernreither's are the most recent. Brentano began his study when the press, the employer and the economist were stiff and haughty in their prejudices against such unions. Dr. Bernreither's cautious and independent research shows us how complete a victory has been won. The great papers, once contemptuous of these ambitions to combine, now hasten to praise this book, wondering how it is that a foreigner can tell the story of these organizations with such skill and fidelity that Englishmen are advised to read it for their own instruction.

With ample time and with unusual facilities for the study of his problem, what is it that this jurist and scholar finds most to commend?

He finds in these unions a capacity to learn. He finds them, in spite of much blundering, steadily concentrating their efforts upon those things that are useful to society as well as to themselves. He finds them able to accept defeat in such way as to improve by it. He finds them steadfastly turning away from the dream of the Continental agitator, and dealing more and more confidently with the humbler but realizable facts upon which their improvement depends. He finds that by free and independent initiative they have done a work for society full of instruction for every Government of Europe. In a word, he finds one of the chief signs of England's industrial and moral strength in these same unions of workingmen.

I have often heard it said: "Even if such organizations have done a great and good work in England, we in this free America have no need of such things." This will hardly bear examination. The fierce competitive struggle in our industrial world goes on in

England under precisely the same economic laws that obtain in America.

It may be admitted that the economic need of such institutions is far less than in England a generation ago. Yet the most signal service rendered by these unions has never been primarily economic; except indirectly, probably never will be. The best work has been of educational character.

The claims for purely economic victories (lessened hours and higher wage) have been wildly overstated. Increased mobility of labor, a wider market, and especially the swift development of machinery, first made such improvement possible before any union could score its triumph. In special cases they have forced a lessened working time and added wage, but these gains, if carefully analyzed, will be found to dwindle into such modest proportions as to excite far less enthusiasm than has been felt.

Indirectly, through that disciplined intelligence which long obedience to organized methods gives, very considerable economic results have been won, and they have been won earlier. Yet it grows ever clearer that the great work of the Unions has been, first educational, and only in secondary ways, economic. They are not, however, less to be justified.

Our civilization has stimulated the growing passion for equality — more definitely, for the means and opportunity for equality — until the feeling asserts itself naturally through organization. In this the laborers but catch the tune to which our whole commercial society is marching. Organization among the workers is as sure a sign of new intelligence as is that other discovery made by them in England some forty years ago, viz. :

That no class was wise enough or good enough to prescribe rights or duties to another class. No class was unselfish enough to make the conditions under which another class should live and work.

But now a distinction must be made between two kinds of Unions; Knights and Trade Unions. Schemes so ambitious and so general as those of the Knights of Labor must, I think, fail. A plan that proposes to make men unite at the very points where their material interests most conflict can have but one end. The "sublime harmony" between Knights and Unionists is very largely ideal. Though in countless cases their interests would prove the same, in countless other cases they would (as recent history amply shows) violently conflict.

Again, many of the theoretic claims of the Knights deserve either ridicule or severe censure. Note the confidence, for example, with which they would throw upon the Government such enormous duties as the furnishing of plenty of money and taking charge of the railway service.

Note their attitude towards the whole body of lawyers and bankers. Note the confidence with which they propose to revolutionize the currency. They have passed hundreds of resolutions showing clearly that they have as yet no conception of tendencies, economic and political, that are violently contradictory. I have heard prominent men at labor meetings praise in the same breath Prof. Ely, and Herbert Spencer, with his utter horror of almost every method that the Professor and the Knights alike recommend.

Until events recently forced Henry George to state clearly his radical antagonism to Marx, the philosophies of both of these men were lauded and accepted. I tried last winter, before a body of workingmen in Boston, to show how fundamental a difference existed between George and Marx. One of the most influential Labor leaders in the State denied that any such contradiction could be shown. The last three or four numbers of Mr. George's paper show us what the antagonism is. So, too, the too vague and unrelated principles of the Knights caused no trouble as long as they constituted merely an ideal—an ideal held erect far out of reach of troublesome realities,—but the moment the generous phrases were brought down and forced to close with the tough facts of political passion and the clear-cut self-interests of the trade unions, then, the inherent weakness of social philosophy according to the Knights appeared.

These weaknesses and contradictions must, I believe, more and more appear in the struggle with definite self-interest of distinct trades, until the Knights go to the wall, or change their scheme until it mates with such widely varied interests as are found among the whole body of the wage-earners.

In a multitude of cases the real identity of interest is not, as the Knights assume, between two or more groups of laborers, but between the laborers and their employer. So direct indeed is this perpendicular line of common advantage that a very little conflict between Knights and Trade Unions brings out violently the antagonism of interest. I wish to bring out this difference between the Knights and the Unions; first, in order to avoid confusion, and

secondly, in order to show the better what a real service the Knights have done and are doing for society, if we consider educational results rather than the economic. Judged strictly from industrial results they have thus far done probably much more harm than good ; but educationally and politically, using the word broadly, they are, through their organizations, doing a work for the community of extreme value. As this political and educational service is identical with what seems to me good in the Trade Unions, I shall not further distinguish between the two.

I wish now briefly to consider the service these labor organizations are doing the community. I shall speak almost wholly of things that I have known about during two years of intimate experience with labor men and movements. If it can be shown that these Unions are growing into schools for the training of the very virtues that a struggling democracy needs ; if it can be shown that in spite of gross blundering they tend to strengthen our society just at those points where a wise and impartial scholar like Sir Henry Maine finds us dangerously weak ; if it can be shown that the more prudent and conservative instincts are taking the place of turbulent and thoughtless impulses, that cautious leaders are beginning to replace the mere mouthers, we shall see how real is our indebtedness to such forces.

All these things I find true among so many Unions in different parts of the country and among those in widely differing trades as to leave little doubt that what all competent opinion finds true in England is becoming true in America. I know no way to tell more truthfully what this service is, what especially it promises to become, than by looking at the rise and growth of a Union hardly three years old.

I will ask you to consider a community in which are some thousands of wage-earners living (so far as any training that could be called *social* is concerned) lives of the most thoughtless and irresponsible individualism. This kind of individualism was harmless enough in our earlier village life, but in our growing cities it leaves far too large a number in a very dangerous isolation. It leaves them untouched by those influences which alone can *socialize* men's instincts. I believe we do not in the least realize how grave is the danger to society of a large class in our cities that is absolutely cut off from every influence except such as lead to anti-social feeling.

I am confident that large numbers in all our cities have been brought over from this risky isolation into a schooling which, despite all its faults, tends powerfully to develop in them conservative and purely social qualities. Such training will be partial. Beyond the sharp outline of their organization their selfishness will often show itself with something like brutality. Yet the organization furnishes us with the strong beginnings of social discipline.

Look again at the work done upon members of the Union referred to. If we exclude a small percentage of exceptional men, they are under no influence that could teach them politically and economically the very things most useful to them and to society. Over the large majority, and especially over the most influential, the Church has no influence whatever. For a few the public library and three or four secret societies do something. But the large body of them are left after work is done to amuse themselves on the street, in billiard and pool rooms, in the theatre, grog-shop, or, worst of all, in the secret rooms of some small club.

One day some hot words from the foreman in the mill start the new interest. The men gather at noon to discuss their supposed grievance. Within a week speakers from another town are there to instruct them. A hall is secured and the union established, and into the lives of those men comes a new and powerful interest, an interest strong enough and constant enough to bring them together four and five nights in the week. What are they doing?

Plenty of foolish things, doubtless, but, upon the whole, they are attending to what they understand to be their own interests. They subscribe for the journal of their craft, published in the interest of the employers. They subscribe for several labor papers from different parts of the country. These papers are filled with errors, but the literature creates a new intellectual interest. Books upon the labor question and upon economics are bought and circulated. Lecturers representing different points of view are asked to address them. Under the pressure of another Union, temperance resolutions are passed which result after much discussion in what has already proved to be a definite influence against intemperance.

Meeting together for a winter brings them into such relations of confidence and good-fellowship that a mutual insurance society is formed against accidents and death. This is in imitation of hundreds of such societies made possible throughout the land by such Unions.

We find these men beginning, through their organization, to ask seriously, for the first time, questions about their business in its larger relations. The fear that too large profits are sliced off their wages leads them to ask about all that enters into the trade — cost of material, insurance, rent, state of the market and all the questions, indeed, that enter into the trade that employs them. They are, in a word, just beginning to grapple with the great questions of national industry, and this new energy of interest the Union organizes and directs.

Soon they begin to experiment with politics — to see what may be done through organized effort to reach by legislation their economic end. It stands to reason that they will blunder sadly in dealing with the industrial problem. But in what illustrious company they will march! What wisest and stoutest head has not been muddled over some phase of this vast question? Note, however, that these men are beginning freely, at the sacrifice of much time and money, to *reckon* with the problem. Through these same organizations they are brought into such vital relation to the business world and its laws that they must in their own defence study the new problems long and earnestly.

They not only study and discuss, they begin to experiment.

Like all men roused to study anything, they begin to form a theory about it. These workers quickly get such theory. "Labor produces all wealth," "Capital gets far too large a profit," etc. They experiment by striking.

Within eighteen months in the Union of which I am speaking are two strikes. Today the best men say frankly: "The strikes failed." One of their chief officials says openly: "We can't get what we want in that way." The dull ones don't see this yet, but they are learning it.

I know positively that under this experience an entirely new conception of the business situation has been gained, and it seems fair to ask how these men would have learned otherwise so valuable a lesson. Through much hard contact with fact and law labor organizations are learning the political and economic conditions of existence in a growingly complex society. They are learning the sharp, close limits through which success in this life is possible. They are learning to adapt themselves to the vigorous conditions of nature and to economic law.

Two years ago I heard a labor leader and editor say: "We can raise wages throughout America 25 per cent. without checking

business in the least." Another speaker was persuading his audience that, under present conditions, five hours' work per day would be ample for the comfort of all. When the wage-earners in such a political society as ours hold to such errors as these, how can they be taught the soberer reality?

They are stirred into intense intellectual activity on the subject, they are organized and grimly determined to use votes to gain their economic end. Under such circumstances is it not fortunate that, even at considerable expense to business, they can be taught the truth about political and business possibilities? That the Unions are doing just this most needed work no one can doubt who looks fairly at the facts. Signs of greater soberness can be seen all along the line. A growing caution appears everywhere in their papers and in their published resolutions. I could give a hundred instances of which the following is typical:

The silk hatters some weeks since reported: "Experience has taught us the utter futility of strikes." Is it at all probable that these hat-makers would have learned this most valuable lesson in any other way. Strikes lessened; meantime, the amount of the product lessened wages; interfered with business; did, indeed, a good deal of mischief. But every thoughtful student sees in this movement something deeper than the merely material result.

Can we not bear to have the world's business bothered a little, if we get another and higher value out of it, a value that, even for the business, will finally justify itself?

Another Union says; "We have tried boycott and strike and see that we can't get what we want in that way." What precisely has been learned here? They have learned how fatal it is to tamper, by rude means, with that infinitely delicate mechanism through which the world's industry is carried on, and thus, in the more successful and older Unions, prudence, forethought and honest endeavor to study the situation are taking the place of clumsy artifice.

Let any one study the history of most of the older Unions, and it will appear that at first there was a sort of savage selfishness of the narrowest type. At first no point of view but their own. Then, under experience, it is found necessary to reckon in the interest of the employer as well, and, finally, that constant reference has to be made to public opinion and to society at large.

Here in little is the history of progress in every separate group that makes society. Here is the chief value of such organizations.

They are helping to build up the social instinct as against the egotistic instinct. They are forcing large bodies of uninstructed men to deal long and earnestly both with the theory and practice of our industrial problems. They are doing this in such a way as to discipline their members into a capacity for wiser citizenship.

I doubt if any single influence in this country acts more directly and more powerfully towards this end of making the kind of man the Republic wants than these Unions.

In spite of overmuch that is petty and tyrannical the Unions are themselves little republics, exercising upon their members an influence distinctly intellectual and moral. The method of election, the system of voting, the holding of office, the constant testing of personal fitness for special duties, the way in which responsibility is thrown upon the individual, the way in which responsibility is taken by the whole body, as in case of a dishonest treasurer; the whole machinery indeed is such as to bring the men under a measure of essentially moral discipline. The discipline is moral because the will of the individual is forced to submit regularly to the organized will of the whole.

These Unions are, in a word, industrial and political schools, teaching in our midst to some million and a half of men, the very qualities of disciplined intelligence which are growing daily more indispensable to our democratic society. To those who need it most they are teaching the habit of obedience to something outside themselves. They are learning here through their own free initiative both to govern and be governed. This capacity of submitting to laws that they themselves have made is the hopeful beginning of an education, political and industrial, that society will more and more need in our immediate future.

Through and by the help of these organizations their struggles, experiments and defeats so react upon themselves that the hardest and most valuable of all lessons is being taught them. The Unions are making their members daily more capable of dealing with the world's business according to its own laws; they are making them more capable, through repeated experiences and struggles, of using more cautiously and wisely the forces of politics in the industrial sphere.

The Unions are, in a word, training the wage-earner into the sure possibilities of a larger and safer citizenship. For such service is it not fair that we should be toward them a little more discriminating and just?









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